

# THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

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## MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

### I

BEFORE we begin to investigate what Mahāyāna Buddhism is, we ought to know what Hinayāna Buddhism, so called, is. By the Buddhists it is generally understood that the Āgamas are Hinayāna pure and simple, and that all the twenty different schools which branched off from the two principal divisions, known as the Elders (*Sthāvira* 上座部) and the General Council (*Mahāsaṅghika* 大衆部), belong to the Hinayāna, and that both the Hinayāna and the Mahāyāna were taught by the Buddha himself while he still walked on earth. Lately, however, some scholars agree that it is the Hinayāna only Śākyamuni taught while the Mahāyāna is a later development of the primitive Buddhism. Which of these views stands on the sounder basis of fact and logic?

My contention is: the Buddha did not necessarily teach the Hinayāna nor the Mahāyāna, as these are the designations invented later; what was really preached by the Buddha himself was primitive Buddhism in which there was yet no differentiation. Even the Āgamas which are regarded as the texts of Hinayāna were not compiled into a written form until some centuries passed after the Nirvana, and naturally there are in it some elements which cannot be considered primitive. But this must be conceded, that the Āgamas contain more primitive Buddhism than other scriptural texts, and that what

is to be designated *Hīnayāna* has its origin in the doctrines expounded in the *Āgamas*; for the *Sarvāstivāda* (說一切有部), which believes in the reality of all things, is based on the *Āgamas*. The fact, however, remains the same that the *Āgamas* were not the original texts of primitive Buddhism. If so, the twenty schools of *Hīnayāna* are far from being primitive; for when we examine their doctrines, we can trace in some of them the foreshadowings of *Nāgārjuna*, and in others the predecessors of *Asanga*, and they are both the greatest representatives of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. I would generally speak of these "twenty schools of *Hīnayāna*," as in fact walking half-way between the *Mahāyāna* and the *Hīnayāna*.

What then is *Hīnayāna* Buddhism? In my view the *Sarvāstivāda* which is one of the twenty schools is the most characteristic representative of the *Hīnayāna*. But this designation did not of course start from its followers. The name implies inferiority, and was given them by those Buddhists who considered themselves to be the exponents of the great spirit of Buddhism, whereas the *Sarvāstivādins* thought that they were the real and orthodox followers of the Buddha. Indeed, they regarded the other nineteen schools as altogether unorthodox, and as to the *Mahāyāna* teachings elucidated by *Nāgārjuna* and *Asanga*, they denounced them as non-Buddhistic. On the other hand, the *Mahāyāna* adherents led by *Nāgārjuna* and *Asanga* concentrated their forces against the *Sarvāstivādins* telling them that they were the *Hīnayānist*s who had no intelligence to understand the great moving spirit of Buddhism.

As this article is intended principally to explain *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, I will not make any further remarks about the doctrines of the *Sarvāstivāda*.

## II

It is very difficult to state summarily what are the

features of Mahāyāna Buddhism, for there are so many different and sometimes almost irreconcilable ideas all included under the general title of Mahāyāna. The name originated in India, and it will be best to go back to India to understand what those Mahāyānists claimed to be their special doctrines. The history of Buddhism had its own problems to solve as it spread in various countries. First, in India the Buddhists had to decide who were the real followers of the Buddha transmitting his religious ideas, the Mahāyānists or the Hinayānists; in China, the questions centered on what sect really represented the One Vehicle (*Ekayāna* 一乘) of absolute truth; and finally in Japan, the Buddhist followers were engrossed in discussing the relative merits of the Hidden and Manifest doctrines, or in weighing the claims of the Pure Land or the Holy Path. In China and Japan, therefore, the orthodoxy of Mahāyāna Buddhism was not the problem, here all the Buddhists were Mahāyānists, and the problem was accepted from the beginning as fully and finally settled. The history of Buddhism in these nations was to further and develop those ideas which were already regarded as the essence of the Mahāyāna as distinguished from the Hinayāna. To see what those essential ideas were, we better go back to India which was the native land of Nāgārjuna and Asanga.

### III

Generally, Aśvaghōsha is considered to be the forerunner of the Mahāyāna, but on account of the reasons to be stated later I take Nāgārjuna for that, and propose to examine what argument he advanced against the Sarvāstivāda, which was condemned by him as entirely Hinayānistic. Briefly, Nāgārjuna's Buddhism was Mahāyānistic because it went deeper into the nature of things and tried to probe into the mysteries of spiritual life, while the Sarvāstivādins stopped short at the phenomenal and realistic aspect of the universe. They were

satisfied with a logical, intellectual, and moral explanation of life, they took the world as it appears to the senses, they neglected to pay attention to the deepest yearnings of the soul, in fact they regarded those as not concerning our ethical and logical life. It was these assumptions of the Sarvāstivādins that Nāgārjuna fiercely attacked, therefore his arguments tended more to be negative than positive and more mystic and intuitive than logical and discursive.

There are about thirty different works in the Chinese Tripitaka ascribed to Nāgārjuna, of which the most representative ones are his treatises on *Prajñāpāramitā* (智度論) in one hundred fasciculi, the *Mādhyamika* (中論) in four fasciculi, and the *Dvādasa-Nikāya* (十二門論) in one fasciculus. In these we can trace what kind of arguments Nāgārjuna maintained against the followers of the Hīnayāna, and in the *Prajñāpāramitā* (fas. 22) he points out how the Mahāyāna is to be distinguished from the Hīnayāna. According to him, the doctrine that asserts the three "Seals of the Law" (法印) only is Hīnayāna while the Mahāyānists have a fourth "Seal" to affirm, and by this they are essentially differentiated from the Sarvāstivādins. The "Three Seals" were originally thought by the Sarvāstivādins to be the characteristics of Buddhism, but Nāgārjuna now states that to be the true Buddhism there ought to be another "Seal." The three "Seals" are: (1) All things are impermanent; (2) Nothing has an ego-substance, that is, all things are conditioned; and (3) Eternally tranquil is Nirvana. The one "Seal" of Nāgārjuna is that of Absolute Reality. The Mahāyāna has the three "Seals," as they are the features common to all schools of Buddhism, but to make the Mahāyāna what it is, it is needed to add one more "Seal," the Seal of Absolute Reality. In fact, this Mahāyāna Seal is not something totally different in nature from the three common Seals of Buddhism. But it is what lies at the basis of these, giving them a unity and reason. The Mahā-

yāna is built upon this one universal foundation of Absolute Reality.

Now the question is, What does Nāgārjuna mean by the Seal of Absolute Reality? This is elucidated in the opening page of the *Mādhyamika*. The statement is thoroughly negative as we may expect, for Nāgārjuna's position is to reach the Absolute by the road of complete negation of all that is affirmed by the Sarvāstivāda or by our common-sense philosophy. This thorough negation he calls the Middle Way (中道), that is, *Mādhyamika*. Logically, the Middle Way of absolute negation is nonsensical, there is no coherence of thought in it as far as its literal sense is concerned, and this is where Nāgārjuna's Buddhism is mystical. The opening stanza thus reads:

“No birth, no death;  
No permanence, no extinction;  
No oneness, no manyness;  
No coming, no passing.”

This is Nāgārjuna's famous series of negations known as the Middle Way of Eight No's, in which he attempts to define the Seal of Absolute Reality. Some may say, this is no definition, no explanation, for we are still at a loss as to how to get into the meaning of absolute reality. My reply would be that while there is no apparent definition in its ordinary sense, we are here really approaching the central idea of absolute reality. For it is beyond our analytical understanding and every attempt we make in this direction to get a kind of logical explanation is sure to be baffled. All that we can state about the ultimate truth of things will be to negate everything that can be asserted about it. The negations of Nāgārjuna are not in fact to be confined to these eight subjects. The negation is universally applicable to every conceivable term. There may be an infinitude of negatives, and

when the universe is swept clean of all its affirmations, there looms up for the first time the truth of absolute reality. The Eight No's may thus be summed up in one NO, which will stamp the seal of negation on the whole field of human ideation. Kichizo (吉藏), the Chinese commentator on Nāgārjuna's *Dvadasa-Nikāya*, says that these negations are what constitutes the essence of Mahāyāna Buddhism. If so, the Mahāyāna doctrine is ultimately the philosophy of Emptiness (*Śūnyatā* 空).

In the *Dvadasa-Nikāya*, this is unequivocally asserted; the book opens with the statement that "I am now going briefly to expound what is meant by Mahāyāna." If the author has not fully disclosed the signification of Mahāyāna in his *Mādhyamika* or in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, he is now expressly out in the *Dvadasa-Nikāya* with the definite idea of telling us what he really means by Mahāyāna. As soon as he finishes his preliminary remarks he comes out with this: "To state generally what constitutes the deep sense [of the Mahāyāna], it is Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*). Those who thoroughly attain to the doctrine of Emptiness, also thoroughly understand what the Mahāyāna is, they realise the six virtues of perfection (*pāramitās* 六波羅密) in their person, and they know no impediments [in the course of their spiritual life]. Therefore, I propose to elucidate *Śūnyatā* (emptiness), and the doctrine of *Śūnyatā* is attainable through the twelve entrances."

"The deep sense of the Mahāyāna consists in Emptiness"—this explains the whole thing. The philosophy of *Śūnyatā* is then the foundation of the Mahāyāna thus distinguishing itself from the Hīnayāna, that is, Sarvāstivāda. According to the latter, the relativity of ego-lessness of things is the ultimate truth, but Nāgārjuna now insists that things are relative or conditioned as they abide in Emptiness, or that they are ego-less because they are dependent upon Emptiness. The

Sarvāstivādin are right as far as they go, but they do not go far enough, they do not fathom the depths of Emptiness from which all things, related to one another and without an ego, derive their reason of existence. The basis of the relativity of things lies in Emptiness, that is, in the Seal of Absolute Reality. Hence the Mahāyāna paradox, "what is empty is real, and what is real is empty."

But Nāgārjuna's theory of Emptiness ought not to be confused with nihilism or an empty abstraction. The truth of the Mahāyāna transcends the analysis of logic, and he alone can realise it whose insight has deeply penetrated into the reason of things, for such is really an enlightened one.

#### IV

Nāgārjuna and Asanga were two stars of the first magnitude in the Indian history of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The one represented the Mādhyamika school and the other was the founder of the Vijñānamātra. The Sarvāstivāda was their common antagonist, while Nāgārjuna negated it, Asanga made a positive advance in the theory of the mind. He was not satisfied with the "sixth consciousness" of the Sarvāstivādin, he created the "seventh consciousness" (*Manovijñāna*) and even the "eighth consciousness" (*Ālaya-Vijñāna*), he then made the latter the carrier of all the seeds (種子) of work, from which this phenomenal world took rise. The incipient glimmerings of this theory are traceable in the teachings of the Vātsīputriyā (犢子部) and the Aryasaṃmatīyā (經量部), of the twenty schools of the Hinayāna.

For the study of this theory the Chinese Tripitaka furnishes us with ten works of Maitreya, about eight of Asanga, seven by Vasubandhu, and commentaries on some of these works by their followers. The most important of Asanga's is the *Essentials of Mahāyāna* (*Samparigraha* 攝大乘論) and Vasubandhu's *Concise Treatises on the Theory of*

*Vijñānamātra* (唯識卅頌及廿頌) with their commentaries by Dharmapāla and others. These are indispensable to the students of Asanga.

Asanga has a larger work known as *Yogacārya-Bhūmi* (瑜伽師地論) in one thousand fasciculi, which is traditionally ascribed to the Bodhisattva Maitreya and the *Essentials of the Mahāyāna* is a sort of compendium of this. The work is divided into ten chapters treating of the ten characteristic features of Mahāyāna Buddhism as distinguished from the Hinayāna. The author declares that the Mahāyāna is greater than the Hinayāna because of these ten points of superiority. Of which the first and the second are what constitute the philosophical basis of the Mahāyāna in contradistinction to the Buddhism of the Sarvāstivādins.

The first point of superiority, according to Asanga, is that the Mahāyāna has a higher principle to explain the origin of universe and life, by which he means the hypothesis of Alaya-vijñāna or the "eighth consciousness." All the seeds, mental as well as material, are preserved here just as things are kept in a storehouse. "Alaya" means "storing" and it is imagined by most people that this "Alaya" is the real ego-soul from which starts the consciousness of the self. This school thus has quite a complicated system of psychological theory, which, however, I am not going to explain in the present article.

The second point of superiority claimed by Asanga is that the Mahāyāna distinguishes three aspects of existence whereby the Middle Way of Buddhism is effectively proclaimed. They are Relativity, Conditionality, and Reality. In short, we are all confused in our way of looking at things, for they are not really what they appear to the senses. In this respect they are empty, *Sūnya*, the subjective images are not necessarily the objective realities. Objectively considered, things are mutually conditioned and conditioning, they are phenomena



woven in time and space, and they have no absolute independent existence. They are all governed by the law of conditionality. But this does not deny the existence of something really real. Asanga asserts there is a world of reality; when all is pronounced relative and therefore of no permanent value, this does not mean that existence is an absolute void but that it is not as it appears to our confused consciousness. The Alaya is no empty assumption. Thus the special feature of Asanga's Mahāyāna philosophy has come to be idealistic, strongly emphasising the subjective or psychological element of Buddhism.

He thought the source of all things lies in the Alaya, and distinguishing three aspects of reality struck the Middle Way between the Astivādin and the Śūnyavādin (有宗及空宗).

Vasubandhu following the steps of his brother Asanga's straightway declared the philosophy of Vijñānamātra, which is most comprehensibly explained in his two śāstras, known as the *Treatise of Twenty Gāthās* and the *Treatise of Thirty Gāthās*. He was one of the most voluminous writers and his works are reported to have amounted to one thousand. Of these his treatises on the theory of Vijñānamātra are most read. The one consisting of thirty gāthās is the positive exposition of the subject, whereas the other with twenty gāthās proves the theory from the negative side. The treatises, however, being too concise and comprehensive, it was necessary to have commentaries to make them intelligible enough for the general reader. They were compiled by Dharmapāla and others, and the work is known in the Chinese Tripitaka as the *Vijñānamātrasiddhi* (成唯識論).

## V

Before introducing Aśvaghosha let me remark that my view is contrary to the generally accepted one; for I have

some strong grounds to believe that the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* which is traditionally ascribed to Aśvagosa and which is the only work of his expounding his philosophical view of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is not really his, but a Chinese product, presumably trying to systematise the two Mahāyāna schools of Nāgārjuna and Asanga. The work is most ingeniously executed, being one of the best Mahāyāna treatises ever written in China as well as in India, and it profoundly influenced the course of historical development of Buddhism in the Far East. For this reason, whoever the real author of the *Awakening of Faith* was, we cannot afford ignoring its significance in our account of Buddhism. As it is, however, traditionally regarded as an Indian Mahāyāna work, I have proposed here to expound its philosophy next to that of Asanga.

Whatever all the historical evidences of Aśvagosa's treatise being a Chinese work, logically there is no doubt that it is a synthesis of Śūnya philosophy and the Vijñānavādin. The main idea is based on the Avatamsaka (華嚴) doctrine of the Dharmadhātu (法界), which forms the central thought of the *Awakening of Faith*. According to Aśvagosa's own terminology, the ultimate cause of the universe is "One Mind" (*Ekacitta* 一心) or "One Dharmadhātu" (一法界) or "Mind of all beings" (衆生心), and it can be viewed in two aspects, noumenal and phenomenal. From the noumenal point of view, it is true Suchness, the Śūnya, and from the phenomenal point of view, it is subject to the conditions of birth and death. To quote from the treatise:

"Generally stated, Mahāyāna is of two aspects: one is Being (*Dharma* 法) and the other is Signification (*Artha*? 義). By the so-called Dharma is meant the Mind of All Beings and in it all things, worldly and unworldly, are embraced. By virtue of this mind, the signification of Mahāyāna is revealed: for as Suchness it is the essence of Mahāyāna, and as the cause of birth and death it is the Self-essence, Func-

tion (or Attribute) and Work of Mahāyāna. By the so-called Signification three things are considered: (1) the Greatness of Essence, for all things are in Suchness and show neither increase nor decrease; (2) the Greatness of Attribute, for in the Tathāgata-Garbha there are merits infinite in kind; and (3) the Greatness of Work, for by it are produced all the causes and effects of goodness, worldly as well as unworldly, for it is the original vehicle of all Buddhas, and also the vehicle used by all Bodhisattvas to pass across toward Tathāgatahood."

This is the whole philosophy of Aśvaghosha in a nutshell. The wording is somewhat archaic but the meaning is unmistakable. According to the author, Mahāyāna may be explained from two points of view: first, he tells us what constitutes the substance of the Mahāyāna, and secondly he explains why this is to be denoted Great (*Mahā*). What constitutes the substance of the Mahāyāna is called by him the Mind of All Beings, that is to say, this ordinary everyday mind of ours filled with defilements is Mahāyāna, for from this all things are produced. The Mind is in its essence the suchness of things and remains forever unchanged and absolute; but at the same time as it is conditional, it becomes, is subject to birth and death, and for this reason we can distinguish three conceptions involved in it. They are Essence, Attribute and Work.

Nāgārjuna is an absolutist, in him there is no trace of the idealist, but Asanga is the latter. Asvaghosha shows very strong proclivity toward idealism, but his "Mind" is not a duplicate of Asanga's Alaya. Aśvaghosha calls it the Tathāgata-Garbha in which all things are stored up, and, when conditions are furnished, it will bear fruit of all value. Aśvaghosha's negative conception of the Mind as Śūnya comes from the Prajñā philosophy of Nāgārjuna, while the positive side of the Tathāgata-Garbha is derived from such Mahāyāna Sūtra

as the *Srīmālā* and *Lankāvatara*, and to a great extent influenced by Asanga's *Vijñānamātra* theory.

Thus Aśvaghosha stands in the middle way between the two Mahāyāna schools of Indian Buddhism, and in a happy way synthesises them. Therefore, Gangyo (元曉) of Korea, one of the great commentators of Aśvaghosha, remarks that the *Awakening of Faith* is the father of all treatises and the author is the king of all critics. The book is written concisely and at the same time most comprehensibly, so many thoughts, deep and suggestive, are compressed into a fasciculus containing a little over five thousand Chinese characters. One of the most original conceptions that influenced the later Buddhist scholars is that of the triple aspect of Mahāyāna, as Essence, Attribute, and Work. According to this, Mahāyāna is great in Essence, for the mind contains in it the absolute element of the universe; secondly, Mahāyāna is great in Attribute, for it embraces in itself innumerable possibilities which may develop into all forms and functions, and thirdly, Mahāyāna is great in Work, for when all these Attributes infinite in variety are disciplined and directed, they will accomplish an innumerable amount of work towards the perfection of Buddhahood. The Mind of all beings which constitutes the Essence of Mahāyāna, though humble in its phenomenality, is great, when its infinite possibilities are considered. Is not the Mind a storage of all good things which may finally mature themselves into Tathāgatahood? Is it not the vehicle that will carry us mortal beings across the sea of birth and death finally landing us on the shore of Nirvana?

## VI

In China Mahāyāna Buddhism made further development, and it is not proper just to retain here the name of the Mahāyāna without some modifications, which had great significance in India when used in contrast with the Hinayāna.

As a matter of fact, all the schools of Chinese Buddhism are Mahāyāna, but they are really more than Mahāyāna. They may be grouped under four classes: the Perfect Doctrine, the Extra-scriptural, the Esoteric, and the Pure Land. Each of these is a further advance of Nāgārjuna's Śūnya philosophy or Asanga's doctrine of Vijñānamātra. By the "Perfect" doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism I mean the Tendai Sect of Chigi (智顗, 538-597) who systematised various branches of Buddhism into which it had been split during the Southern and the Northern Dynasties, as well as the Kegon Sect of Hōzō (法藏, 643-712) who flourished in the north. The founders of these sects were not satisfied with the so-called Mahāyāna Buddhism in India they delved more deeply into the secrets of Buddhism, and interpreted them according to the light allowed to each of them.

With the Perfect Doctrine Schools, the Mahāyāna has reached its climax, the human intellect cannot go any higher unless it strikes quite a new path of thought, and Buddhism has come to develop into mysticism. The negative aspect of it is Zen Buddhism, styling itself the Extra-scriptural school while the positive form of it is the Shingon Buddhism, known as Esoteric. Zen is extra-scriptural because it claims to transmit the spirit of the Buddha, which defies all the literary discourses in the scriptures. With Shingon the doctrine that each individual phenomenon or manifestation is in itself the absolute has been carried to its strictly logical conclusion, and thus every imaginable existence has come to express a mystical and symbolic value. The conception of the Vajramandala (金剛界) and the Garbha-mandala (胎藏界) is the key to the esoteric philosophy of Shingon Buddhism.

In contrast to all these schools of the Mahāyāna, the Pure Land Sect emphasises the significance of Faith. Buddhism which started with an Enlightenment through *Vidya* (intelligence) has now *Bakti* (faith) as its first principle in

the various branches of the Pure Land doctrines. It is simply amazing to see what a variety of teachings is brought together under the one banner of Mahāyāna Buddhism; and it is quite a fascinating subject of study to trace its development in India into the Śūnyavāda theory of Nāgārjuna and the Vijñānamātra philosophy of Asanga, and its further growth in China and Japan as exemplified by the Tendai, Kegon, Zen, and Jōdo doctrines of Buddhism.

The Idea of Amitābha Buddha taught by the Jōdo (Pure Land) school seems at first sight to contradict all the dogmas of Buddhism, but we know that it is the moral and religious culmination of the Mahāyāna Buddhology which unfolded itself after the passing of the Buddha in conjunction with the development of the idea of Suchness (眞如) as the ultimate reality of existence. This, however, will require an independent article to be discussed in some detail.

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